

The INQUIRER

£1

www.inquirer.org.uk

the voice of British and Irish Unitarians and Free Christians Issue 7838 15 March 2014

UNPROCESSED

MAR 18 2014

UNITARIAN LIBRARY

*Reconsidering the
Prodigal Son*

The INQUIRER

THE UNITARIAN AND FREE CHRISTIAN PAPER

Established 1842

The Inquirer is the oldest

Nonconformist religious newspaper

"To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition."

From the Object passed at the General Assembly of the Unitarian and Free Christian Churches 2001

The Inquirer is published fortnightly by The Inquirer Publishing Company (2004), Registered Charity 1101039.

Editor M Colleen Burns MA

46A Newmarket Road

Cringeliford

Norwich NR4 6UF

ph: 01603 505281

e: inquirer@btinternet.com

Copyeditor Sarah Reynolds

Cover Rembrandt [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

Articles express the views of their authors. Submissions are welcome and may be edited for content and length. They should be emailed or typed and should be the author's original work or be attributed appropriately.

Subscribe Annual subscriptions are £35 with discounts for bulk orders. Cheques payable to 'The Inquirer'. Write to James Barry

24 Lodge Lane

Keymer, Hassocks

West Sussex, BN6 8NA

ph: 01273 844940

e: inquirersubs@gmail.com

Advertise for £6 per column cm, on 3-col page, plus VAT or £7.50 per col cm, on a 2-col page. A one-page supplement is £200. One column on a 2-col page is £100, on a 3-col page, £75. A5 fliers may be inserted for £70 plus VAT. Contact the editor for details.

Births, marriages and deaths are 50p a word plus VAT.

Find out more about Unitarians

www.unitarian.org.uk

or email info@unitarian.org.uk

The General Assembly, Essex Hall

1-6 Essex Street

London WC2R 3HY

ph: 0207 2402384

Inquiring Words Winter Encounter

Some days when I tend my garden I wonder
if it is the garden tending me,
a frayed rug of grass inviting me to rest,
the kingdom that frees me from more rushing.
My labour is not about getting back to nature
but a returning to the bedrock of my nature;
the lost animal in me digging for a home,
a good sweat of toil anointing me.

A haven to earth this anger of mine;
the soil is deep enough to hold all my growing and dying.
The brambles arc over my troubles,
their tangled, torn limbs knit with my complexities.
Whilst lunging at a flowerbed with a spade
I sense a plodding movement beneath the flash of metal.
A flicker of panic scurries through me,
as I sense a trickster emerging from a portal.

A toad appears in the fairyland threshold
between the damp air and the darkness under the leaves,
squatting in his ill-fitting wet suit skin,
the fabric of his body gathered up in rubbery folds.
When faced with danger I scarp and hide
but not him. He masterfully chooses stillness.
His damaged whitened eye refusing even to blink,
unmoved by my human restlessness.

Our silent rendezvous stretches into a vast exchange,
his ability to hold his ground renders me the small, threatened thing.
The realisation that I have not cut him
is the most joyful world news in that moment.
He appears as a Prince on my overcast day,
bringing peace and tranquillity from the mud.
His aura of otherness draws me in,
furnishing my inner world with a fragile holiness.

— John Harley

Jane Barraclough



Jane Barraclough

It is with much sadness that *The Inquirer* reports that the Rev Jane Barraclough, minister at Cross Street Chapel, Manchester, died on 3 March at her parents' home in Reading. A family service is planned for Jane's cremation, and a memorial service and celebration of her life will take place at a later date.

Cards and condolences may be sent to her family at: 84 Eastern Avenue, Reading, Berkshire RG1 5SF.

A full obituary will appear in a future issue of *The Inquirer*.

Follow @The__Inquirer (two underscores) on Twitter. A little shot of Unitarian news and faith in 140 characters. <https://twitter.com/>

'Prodigal Son' story continues to teach

Like many significant stories, the 'Prodigal Son' changes in resonance as we read it at different times in our lives says **Bridget Spain**

One advantage of Bible stories is their familiarity; we learned them in childhood they are part of our culture. They contain layers of meaning that gradually reveal themselves through reflection and by our lived experience. The 'Prodigal Son' is one with layers of meaning which are gradually revealed.

Some years ago I preached on that parable. My argument was that I had more to learn from the predicament of the elder brother than from the prodigal. Those of us brought up in the Christian faith learnt that God is always ready to forgive his erring children. All that is required is that we ask for God's forgiveness. Not only are we forgiven, but God rejoices in our return to the fold. This was all old hat.

But the elder brother's predicament resonated. I imagined the scenario following the departure of the younger son; the worry and disappointment of the parents, the financial implications for the family – losing a large part of the family wealth. I could imagine the emptiness of the home following the son's departure. Because both sons worked the land, the eldest would have that sense of emptiness plus an additional work load.

Prodigal dishonoured

I did not appreciate the cultural implication of the son taking his inheritance and moving to a "foreign country". In a culture based on the extended family, even today, children are not given a portion of their inheritance to travel the world. By his actions the younger son was, in effect, treating his father as if he were dead. Against all societal norms the father allowed his son the freedom to leave. The younger son brought dishonour to his father and family. This layer in the story is one we westerners may not readily appreciate.

The eldest son assumed the role of the "well behaved" child; but no matter how good he was, his parents continued to mourn the absent one. As children we may have sought

parental approval by being "the good child". When his brother returned the elder one felt the pain of jealousy as he realised that all his efforts to win approval by being the "good" son had no meaning for the parents. It's easy to empathise with the elder son when he refused to come into the family party.

Meaning changes as years pass

As a child I saw the story as being solely about the accessibility of God's forgiveness. As an adult I was drawn to the very practical predicament of the elder son. Having recently read some of the writings of the Jesuit theologian Henri Nouwen, I am drawn back to the story of the prodigal son. Henri Nouwen was a Dutch Catholic priest, academic and theologian. He lectured at Yale and Harvard, he wrote about 40 books on spirituality. As spiritual director, he corresponded with hundreds of individuals. It was Nouwen who coined the expression "wounded healer" – the belief that only when we experience and accept our inner pain that we can help others to heal. Nouwen the charismatic lecturer, the one who reached out to others as spiritual guide, suffered intense inner pain and loneliness in his personal spiritual life. This was due to the fact that Nouwen was homosexual – yet he remained fully committed to a church that condemns homosexual acts as

being intrinsically evil. We can only imagine how this must have gnawed at Nouwen's innermost soul.

Picture captivated

One day Nouwen saw a poster of Rembrandt's painting "The Return of the Prodigal Son". The picture captivated him. He travelled to the Hermitage Museum to see the painting and sat for hours watching the play of light move across the huge painting. For the rest of his life, contemplation of the story of the return of the prodigal son, as depicted by Rembrandt, formed the basis of his spirituality.

Nouwen strongly identified with the prodigal son. It is easy to identify Catholic guilt here – it's visible in bucketfuls. But, and the 'but' is vital, Nouwen saw himself as a sinner but he also *felt* the loving embrace of the father. The focus of Nouwen's contemplation was the gentle open hands of the father as he holds his son close to his heart. It was the light of understanding and forgiveness in the father's face. Nouwen felt himself held close to the father's heart. When he identified himself with the prodigal son held gently in the arms of the father, Nouwen
(Continued on next page)



The gentle open hands of the father as he holds his son close to his heart attracted Henri Nouwen's attention. Detail of 'The Prodigal Son' by Rembrandt.

'Prodigal Son' is about finding home

(Continued from previous page)

knew that he had reached home. Home for Nouwen was to be held in love; not because Nouwen had earned that privilege; but because he is a child of God.

In contemplation of Rembrandt's painting, which personality in the picture do you associate with? And what if any significance is there in the association you make? Let's look at the personalities involved.

Rewards for keeping rules

I immediately associate myself with the elder son, the one who kept the rules – in part from conviction and perhaps not cheerfully enough – maybe with a holier-than-thou attitude. Perhaps I kept them from fear or from lack of imagination – simply dullness on my part. I enjoy the approval of family and friends. Do I keep the rules in order to retain the approval of society? Having kept the rules, I admit that I feel entitled to my reward. I deserve the comfort of good living. I earned my holiday; I deserve the good bottle of wine. I don't easily empathise with those who take risks and then expect others – or God forbid, me – to pick up the pieces when the risk falls flat on its face.

Is there another way of seeing the life of the elder dutiful son?

The younger son might, with some justification, call his elder brother an insufferable bore. He might tell him to "get a life for himself". He might point out that there is a big world out there and a life to be lived. He could point out that to live authentically one must be totally oneself and not just to conform to societal expectations. He might point out that if we only wait for good things to come to us; for people to thank us or voice their appreciation then we may be waiting for a very long time.

In his own defence, the younger brother could argue that he, unlike the older brother, had really lived and may have acquired some wisdom from his experiences. Remember that the son began his adventure with a great deal of wealth. He spent his money on 'wine women and song'; the early experiences; were good they were more than just good they were great; he enjoyed them. Yes things did go wrong but there would have been happy memorable times of intense living; when the world was his oyster.

Perhaps we should emulate the father

We all know how every reformed alcoholic has a store of really entertaining stories to tell about the fun times drinking. Honest people will admit that over time the fun is lost in the addiction. But people become addicted to drugs because the first experience of a high is so wonderful. If it were unpleasant there would be no addicts. Somewhere along the path the son learned wisdom because he found the wit, the courage, the self preservation to return home. In the moment of the embrace from the father, the younger son has the possibility of a new beginning a new life built on wide experience now coupled with wisdom. Like Nouwen the son feels the father's loving embrace, he has reached his true home.

I wonder if anyone made an association with the father? The

'When he identified himself with the prodigal son held gently in the arms of the father, Nouwen knew that he had reached home. Home for Nouwen was to be held in love; not because Nouwen had earned that privilege; but because he is a child of God.'

– Bridget Spain



Christian ideal is that we should all try to emulate the Father in this story. It is obvious that the father's life experience has taught him that the only important thing in life is our relationships with others – particularly with family. The father runs to greet his son. There are no recriminations; there is no embarrassment about having a son who dishonoured the family in the eyes of their community, only joy and celebration in the return of the son. The father's hands are open in acceptance and blessing. The Christian teaching is that we too are called to reach out to our neighbour; that our neighbour is not limited to the deserving poor. We are called to forgive our brother not once or twice but 70 times seven times. Each one of us has our own "prodigal sons"; individuals who have hurt us or used us. Sometimes we disassociate because we are hurt, sometimes we dissociate from others in order to cause hurt. When we cut ourselves off from others we may feel a sense of satisfaction. The feeling of satisfaction will not endure; because the act of disassociation does not bring healing. While the wounds of hurt remain unhealed the pain will persist.

How do we treat the children of God?

If we set aside our angst and complicated relationships, even at a superficial level, Rembrandt's painting has another lesson. We all encounter individuals who bear a strong resemblance to the figure of the "Prodigal Son". We meet them on the streets, we see them begging on the steps. There are others who have not yet fallen through the net; those who have homes but who live in poverty. How do we treat these children of God? Do we reach out a hand to them or are we like the two onlookers in Rembrandt's painting – comfortable, well dressed observing the drama of life unfolding but doing nothing of any real value? We dismiss their drama because it is not our concern?

The Story of the Prodigal Son continues to reveal new depths of meaning. As all good stories it does this because the story is not something that happened long ago in a far distant land. The story is about us, the events are happening now; we are the characters in the story. We create and we play our part in the drama. We choose the role we play in the drama. We know that we are called to live in the image of the father – open, gentle, forgiving, taking joy from all our relationships. We know our calling. We choose the character we play. There is no rehearsal – it's a one-off performance. It behooves to choose wisely and to act with honour and compassion.

The Rev Bridget Spain is minister at Dublin.

Typhoon Haiyan: The difference you made

By Robert Ince

The British Red Cross is delighted at the response given by our Unitarian movement to the Typhoon appeal and invited Chief Officer, Derek McAuley and Acting Treasurer, Robert Ince, to British Red Cross Headquarters to meet the Chief Executive, Sir Nick Young. Unfortunately Sir Nick had been admitted to hospital but Communications Director, Phil Talbot, passed on his sincere thanks along with a personal message from Laura Deacon, London Community Fundraising manager. This reads:

I would like to send heartfelt thanks from the British Red Cross for all your support during the Typhoon Haiyan Emergency and your generous donations through the Unitarian Clara Barton appeal. We are pleased to say that the Unitarian Clara Barton Fund has raised over £20,000. This is just such a fantastic contribution towards the relief effort and you have made such a difference to all those lives affected. It would not have been possible without you. As you are aware, 14 million people were affected by Typhoon Haiyan; 1.1 million homes were damaged or destroyed, resulting in disruption to water and electricity supplies and food became alarmingly scarce. The International Federation of the Red Cross appealed for Red Cross National Societies, of which the British Red Cross is one, to raise £58m to reach 100,000 families (5 people per family) within 18 months. Twelve Emergency Response Units were deployed from all over the world to provide the Philippines with shelter, water and sanitation, health services, telecommunications and a team of logistics experts who could distribute the aid to the most vulnerable and victims stuck in hard to reach places.



A Red Cross post-typhoon field hospital welcomes baby Fiona Haiyan. Red Cross photo

To give you a better insight into the role of each of these emergency response units (ERU) I have listed some of their actions below:

The Health ERU sets up health care units, which are basic hospitals and worked to prevent outbreak of infectious disease, rebuild medical infrastructure and promote psychological wellbeing. During the first month of the response these health care units delivered 89 babies.

The Water and sanitation ERU is set up producing 40,000 litres of clean water a day, built 10,000 latrines, distributed hygiene kits and also jerry cans to keep water clean and safe and continues to assess water, sanitation and hygiene.

The Logistics ERU are in charge of storing and distributing relief items out of the warehouse based in Cebu, where the team works, sleeps, lives. By mid-December, 24 cargo flights had reached the Philippines with aid.

The Emergency Shelter ERU provided a shelter project team (including construction experts, local carpenters and masons), supporting affected people in rebuilding their homes using typhoon resilient construction techniques, to enable



Robert Ince (l-r), Phil Talbot and Derek McAuley met at Red Cross Headquarters to receive thanks for the Clara Barton Appeal and to discuss future plans.

them to withstand future typhoons. In addition to this they distributed shelter toolkits, shelter materials and grants.

As part of our relief programme we also distribute **unconditional cash grants** to support 250,000 people. This cash grant gives people back their independence during a difficult time ensuring people are able to prioritise their own needs and those of their family. I must reiterate how much your timing made all the difference in helping us respond in this way and we would like to say again a **HUGE thank you** for acting so quickly.

Future Aid

Whilst at the British Red Cross Headquarters, Derek and Robert discussed other ways Unitarians might help the charity. The work of The Red Cross does not just cover response to humanitarian disasters but also includes much educational work including, of course, first aid training. More importantly there are many ways for people, especially young people, to become directly involved in making a difference to the lives of those in need. Those attending the GA will be hearing more of such opportunities.

Robert Ince is a member of the Executive Committee of the General Assembly.



Some Filipino youngsters helped by the Red Cross.

Lent is about more than bread alone

By Jean Bradley

Each of us has a private scripture, not about how God appeared to other people at other times, but about how God appears to us now.

Some of us keep it secret to ourselves. Some of us confide it to those we love.

Such private scriptures are made up of small incidents which, as we continue to ponder them, turn into modest parables. Don't discard your own parables; they are your life experience. In them is the pattern and purpose you seek.

From 'Tales of Body and Soul' by Lionel Blue
Every year, I try to give something up for Lent, but it's not always easy to give things up. It's so easy to be tempted by that extra chocolate or to spend more money than we should, and so on. Lent calls to mind two readings that look at sin and temptation. In one, Julian of Norwich asks, 'What is sin?' and decides that on a personal level it is nothing. And in some ways, I agree with her. In Luke, (4:1-13) Jesus is being tempted, and it certainly doesn't seem like nothing. Jesus has gone into the wilderness, with hardly any shelter from the blazing sun or from the nightly cold. This would be a barren area, so food would consist of wild berries and very little else. Those conditions would cause suffering even for a few days, but he had to endure 40 days and 40 nights. And, the devil goads Jesus; saying he is capable of turning the stones to bread and therefore could find food in plenty. Jesus replies, 'man shall not live by bread alone'.

He is reiterating the words of Moses, who said, 'And thou shalt remember all the way which the Lord thy God led thee these 40 years in the wilderness, to humble thee, and to prove thee, to know what was in thine heart, whether thou wouldest keep his commandments, or no. 'And he humbled thee, and suffered thee to hunger, and fed thee with manna, which thou knewest not, neither did thy fathers know; that he might make thee know that man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the Lord doth man live'. (Deuteronomy 8:2-3)

So that important lesson is taught twice, once in the Hebrew Bible and again in the time of Jesus' temptation. It is a lesson as important to us today as it was then; for our spirituality needs to be prioritised in our lives. We may consider that a person in hunger must think of food above all else, but the temptation story is about power and control, not literal hunger.

The devil shows Jesus the land as far as he can see and says he will give him the power to rule it, if Jesus will only bow down before him.

Haven't we all seen that image in the past few years since the economic collapse – haven't we seen those people with their high-ranking positions, still collecting their millions of pounds in bonuses while other people have lost their savings?

Tom Wolfe's book 'Bonfire of the Vanities' named his character, Sherman McCoy a 1980's Wall Street bond trader, 'Master of the Universe' for he believed he had power above all things and all people. And the same title 'Masters of the Universe' now is given to those bankers who have put themselves before those who they are employed to serve.

How close this is to the temptation of Jesus who is offered the world – as long as he submits to the devil. Maybe the devil is not a horned and hooved creature, but a businessman with



Lent

an expensive car, luxury homes and all the right acquaintances; a man or woman who can show that all material things are possible if only we bow down to the world of power.

And finally, we have the devil asking Jesus to throw himself down from a high place, to see if god and the angels will protect him. For me, this is the ultimate offence, to ridicule a person's faith. What kind of person sneers at another's beliefs – only one with belief in their importance and superiority.

Lent is a good time to look at the many temptations we experience – temptations to be greedy and grasping, childlike enticements where we want more chocolate or someone else's toys. But as we grow up and become adults, the childish greed can become a need for power and control. And if that power is gained by aggression and negative action, one can become a self-serving God. For in our need for power, we can consider ourselves above all, even above the Divine. And that is the beginning of conflict and unhappiness, whether it is on the world stage or simply within our own family or friends.

We as adults have to take responsibility for our actions; we have to live with our behaviour. Julian of Norwich said, 'Ah! Wretched sin, what art thou? Thou art nought.' (13th Revelation from *Revelation of Divine Love* c1393). I believe that she meant that all the things we are tempted by, all the power and ownership we crave are nothing. Nothing. For they are not permanent, for we lose desire for things once we have them. They are only material things which will fade and die. Julian of Norwich believed that being secure in faith makes us realise that these cravings are nothing. I agree. We are only responsible for ourselves, with God to guide us.

With faith, we have a chance. Without faith, we may consider ourselves to be Masters of the Universe. Which should we choose?

The Rev Jean Bradley is minister at Brook Street Chapel, Knutsford.



Jean Bradley

Openness: Creating temples of our ears

I often 'hear' it said that we have a growing literacy problem in this country. Now while I have no wish to dispute this I actually think there is a bigger issue. I think what we really suffer from is declining 'listency'. Most people can talk and write freely but how many of us have truly learnt how to listen? How many of us can say that the ears of our ears are awake? How many of us truly know how to worship at the altar of our ears? How many of us can truly say that we have learnt to listen with the ears of our hearts? Everyone's talking, but who's listening? During worship I recently explored the question 'What is Love'. I compared love to the butterfly and explained that you can't really understand either by pinning them down and pulling them apart. You can only understand a butterfly by watching it fly through the gardens of life. It's the same with love. I shared this service with three congregations, ending in the evening at Dukinfield Old Chapel.

Just as the service was ending and I was offering the blessing, a remarkable thing happened. A butterfly appeared in front of me and began fluttering all around my head. I stopped, half way through the benediction, and just watched it fly around the chapel, open mouthed. As I stood there in silence some of the congregations began to notice it too. After a few moments, which seemed like an eternity, I returned to my blessing and left with a broad grin on my face.

Now, what on earth was a butterfly doing in an old chapel in the north of England on a wet February evening? I cannot answer. I do know that it was a beautiful moment of synchronicity and it got me thinking about the butterfly and how it opens up and is born again. For it is only after it has truly opened up that the butterfly can then fly around the gardens of life, if only for a short time. In spiritual traditions that see animals as totems, the butterfly is a symbol of transformation. It is said that when the butterfly comes into your life as a spirit guide it usually means you are either going through or will soon be going through some internal changes. The metamorphosis of the butterfly symbolises the opening up from a closed state, to a new form of life.

I wonder if this is what is happening to me at the moment. I do feel like I am going through a process of change I have certainly been opened up in so many ways these last few weeks and months as I and those I hold most dear have lost two of our loved ones. I have spent a lot of time listening to my nearest and dearest as we have held one another in our loss. 'The ears of my ears' have most certainly been reawakened in recent weeks. Our General Assembly President, the Rev Bill Darlison, recently spoke at the Altrincham Interfaith Group annual meal. During his talk he shared anecdotes depicting how British society has opened up over the last 50 years, especially towards those who are different to us whether socially, ethnically and or religiously. OK, there is a long way to go, but we do at least listen to one another and engage in ways we never did before. Bill made reference to one of the healing accounts found in Mark's Gospel and how this was symbolic of opening up in dialogue and truly listening. The account is known as 'Jesus

From Nothing to Everything

by
Danny Crosby



Heals a Deaf Man' (Mark 7:31-37). Bill explained that in the account the author is trying to get us to 'listen' by using a clever linguistic aid. In the account Jesus says the Aramaic word Ephphatha, which means 'Open up' as he heals the man. This is perhaps not so strange on the surface as this is certainly the language that Jesus would have spoken. What is strange though is that this is inconsistent with the rest of the Gospel which was originally written in Greek. Bill says that this is a deliberate ploy to make we who are 'listening' to the account pay attention, because something really important is

being taught here. This section of the Gospel is about trying to open up those who are 'listening' to move beyond the confines of their own prejudices. In the same way that the butterfly opens up to a new life, we need to open up beyond the confines of our own prejudices and what we think we know. I feel that so many of our troubles are caused by our inability to truly listen to one another and to new ideas; our troubles are caused by our arrogance and belief that we know best. Therefore by not really listening we fail to understand and therefore empathise with each other and we remain trapped by what we think we know. We need to be opened up like the Buddhist Monk, arms out with his begging bowl, an image of humility and interdependence.

It is humility that opens us up and moves us beyond the confines of what we think we know. There is seeming limitlessness in openness. Who knows how much we can truly change and learn to love if we just stay open, in our hearts, minds and senses? It begins with our ears; it is these that need to be opened. We are after all listening creatures. Our lives begin in our mothers' wombs listening to the many sounds that surround us. Our lives end similarly; I understand that the last faculty that shuts down when we are dying is our hearing. And yet throughout our lives the thing we pay attention to the most is what we see or do not see with our eyes. Not that I'm decrying the eyes here – please do not get me wrong. After all, it was with my eyes that I saw the butterfly/moth that Sunday evening. Nor am I really talking about the two ears either side of our heads. It's the ears of our hearts that I am really speaking of. What I'm really talking about is being more open to all that is life, because by doing so we will improve our 'listency' skills. So let's begin again; let's open ourselves up to the altar of the ears. Let's improve our 'Listency'.

The Rev Danny Crosby is minister at Urmston and Altrincham.

'Dirce Beauty' butterfly photo by Richard Bartz

Why do we fear that we're dying?

I am very grateful to the Unitarians Facebook page (<http://tinyurl.com/pfcpxhu>) which introduced me to Art Lester's 2008 Anniversary sermon in which he asks: "Why is it that we fear we're dying?" (See the text of the sermon here: <http://tinyurl.com/qdulb3k> or here: www.unitarian.org.uk/info/ga-sermon2008.shtml)

Art goes on to say:

'If you were going to ask God about our situation, how would you put it? Would you say, "Dear God, please send me 26 new members of mixed ages – including at least one chartered accountant – who have 9.4 children and can drive a car." Probably not. You'd probably say something more modest, like, "God, what can we do to increase our membership?" leaving the details to Him. But, you know, I think the silence would continue to be deafening. I think it would stay like that until you got around to this question: "What can we do to bring your living presence back into this place that we love?"

'As is so often the case, the question contains the answer. Once you stop worrying about yourself and start concentrating on the presence of the spirit, you unlock the miracle you have been seeking.'

So this is back in 2008. We are now in 2014. How many congregations have spent any time at all considering the nature of the worship they offer? I nearly wrote 'enjoy together' but that is not enough, is it? On the same Facebook page was a quote from Stephen Lingwood:

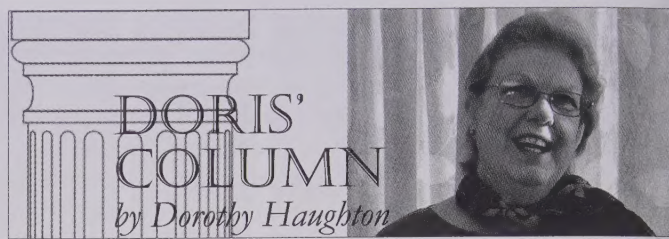
'But if we as a community remain staunchly neutral on matters of faith, then there is really no point in the community. We may be a pleasant social club, an effective political lobbying organisation, or a worthy social service organisation, but we are not a religious community, we are not a church.'

Which takes me back to something I have been wittering on about for ages. I should indeed like the movement to be 'an effective political lobbying organisation' and 'a worthy social service organisation' but I don't believe we can be either if we are not nourished and fed by our faith. And our faith, despite what Upper Pocklington may say, has got to be more than, 'If it was good enough for Flo and Jo it is good enough for me', it has got to be more than boasting of our belief in diversity, Freedom, Reason and Tolerance, it has got to be more than a warm welcome, an interesting address and nice biscuits.

I challenged you all some time ago to 'hold another circle service. Give everyone four large sticky notes. On each of the first three you are to write one of the reasons why you worship. Then read each others' and discuss them. You might end up with a poster for your notice board which reads: 'We worship here. This is why.' Use your fourth note to state what you like best in a service and why, or what you would like more of and why, or what you don't currently get in the services but would like and why. You could end up with a second poster: 'And this is how we do it. And why.'

Or hold a service. Use Art's sermon as the address and then hold a discussion. Yes, stop sitting back in your chairs or your pews and waiting for someone to tell you what to think. Start thinking for yourself. Be bold. Be prepared to disagree. Be prepared to weep. Be prepared to compromise.

Or hold a strapline competition. Ask everyone to bring a short sentence which encapsulates their faith. Ask each person in turn in your congregation to read out theirs. Learn from each other. Could you end up with a strapline that defines your



congregation?

Or do something else. I don't know what. I'm just a service leader. In one of my services I said just that: 'I am a service leader, not a spiritual leader. I do not believe that organising spiritual experiences for you is necessarily part of my remit.'

The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: 'Feed the hungry, visit the sick and free the prisoner. I am pointing out that there are different forms of prison, many types of sickness and hunger and therefore different kinds of feeding and visiting and freeing.'

But you can do none of these things if you yourself are hungry, sick and imprisoned.

If, when you invite me to take a service, you tell me that you love to have silent prayer, meditation, a particular ritual, a particular hymn, or then I'll include it, gladly. But don't expect me to know in advance. And don't expect or to nourish everyone. And don't expect or to nourish everyone forever.

Another quote taken from Facebook: Peter Morales, UUA president said, 'The one growth strategy we have never tried as a movement is religion. And religion is the only growth strategy that will work.'

TALK TO EACH OTHER.

Dorothy Haughton is a worship leader in the Midlands.

Limerick holds first service

On Sunday 23 February, for the first time in 250 years, a Unitarian Service took place in the city of Limerick.

At a meeting of the Synod of Munster last year it was decided that we should try to bring the Unitarian message of Freedom, Reason and Tolerance beyond Dublin and Cork. On a few occasions residents from Limerick asked if there was a Unitarian Church in Limerick and on this basis it was decided that Limerick would be our first venture in spreading our positive Unitarian faith.

The Rev Steve Johnson, a retired UU Minister and member of the Cork Congregation, agreed to lead the service. Unfortunately due to illness Steve had to withdraw from the project. Thank you Steve for all your support for Cork and Limerick; we wish you a speedy recovery. In Steve's absence, the Rev Bridget Spain, minister of the Dublin and Cork congregations, led the service. It was held in a school hall and 16 people attended.

The success in Limerick owes a great deal to Kathryn Wilusc's help with setting up publicity and arranging the hire of the hall. We hope to build on this first step with another Service in March.

– Bridget Spain

IARF, liberal women meet in Birmingham

The International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF) 2014 Congress is planned for 20-27 August at the University of Birmingham. The theme is 'Religious Freedom in the Digital Age'.

Join over 300 delegates to the events, starting with the International Association of Liberal Religious Women on 20-23 August, at the Jurys Inn Hotel with IALRW President Dr Kathy Matsui.

Dr Kamar Oniah Kamaruzaman is nominated as the new IALRW president. A Malaysian Muslim, she currently serves the International Islamic University of Malaysia as a professor in comparative religions and is director of the International Centre for the Alliance of Civilisations (www.iiu.edu.my/intac). She is also president of the Interactive Muslimah Association (IMAN) of Malaysia and vice president of the World Council of Muslims on Interfaith Relations.

On 24 August IARF President Most Rev Mitsuo Miyake of Japan opens the IARF Congress in Barber Hall at the University of Birmingham. After the fanfare and welcome, our keynote speaker is Dr Karen Armstrong, author of *Twelve Steps to Compassion*. More than two dozen great speakers and workshop leaders include His Grace Bishop Angaelos, Bishop General of the Coptic Orthodox Church in the United Kingdom, Professor David Cheetham of the University of Birmingham, Professor Kazi Nural Islam of the University of Dhaka.

The Host Committee is led by Sheikh Muhammed Amin-Evans. We plan to join the parallel young adult programme



in visiting Religious Centres in Birmingham including the Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha – which famously fed 5000 at the Barcelona Parliament of the World's Religions.

The IARF Peacemaking Commission with the World Congress of Faiths, hosted 75 participants at IARF/WCF Horsham in August. The Commission and WCF are planning two small-group seminars this August. The Birmingham Seminar parallels the last two days of IALRW.

Then, on 27 or 28 August, we leave for three days in Belfast with the Rev Chris Hudson MBE, for "Lessons in Peacemaking."

For scholars, 31 August - 4 September, Professor Kanram Mofid invites you to 'Globalisation for the Common Good Initiative' (www.GCGI.info) at Waterperry House near Oxford. This includes a dinner at Harris Manchester College, Oxford honouring Bhai Sahib Mohinder Singh.

For information see: <http://iarf.net/announcement-of-34th-world-congress-2014/>

The British Chapter of the IARF **plans its Annual General Meeting for 10 May** – 10am to 3.30pm at Croydon Unitarian Church. Registration is £5 at the door. Participants will be welcomed by Jonathan Clark, Bishop of Croydon. A worship panel on *Faith and Belief – the Difference between Them* (book by Wilfred Cantwell Smith) is also planned. There will also be a panel on 'Forgiveness, Trust & Fideology' with Peter Sampson and Chris Hudson.

For more information, contact Richard Boeke by telephone: 01403 257 801. Or by email: r.boeke@virgin.net

– Richard Boeke

Congregation participates in student film

By Carol Palfrey

Last June, Jinlong Li, ('Justin' in English), a Chinese postgraduate student at the University of East Anglia, came to our annual Summer Fair at the Octagon Chapel. He was making a film comparing attitudes to same-sex relationships in the UK and China. He was well informed about Unitarian views on the topic and was keen to include some filmed interviews at the Octagon. He and two fellow students came to the chapel to film on several Sunday mornings. We were particularly pleased that they attended several services, one of which happened to be our annual Flower Communion. It was obvious from the spontaneous way they took part in the ceremony that they felt very welcome and at ease in our company.

When the final product—a half-hour film on DVD—arrived we arranged a special film show after the service. Unfortunately, by that time Justin had returned to China to complete his studies. Knowing that some of us would be experiencing the horror of seeing ourselves on film, Kate McKenna, an Octagon member who is studying for the ministry, took as her service title "How do we look?" and invited us to do some hard thinking about whether the impression we give to outsiders is as good as we would like to think it is.

After this excellent preamble, we assembled to watch the film. Interviews with Chinese people living in Norwich demonstrated that some of them have a very different attitude. Justin had chosen three of the interviews with Octagon



Jinlong Li, a Chinese postgraduate student, did interviews at the Octagon Unitarian Chapel for his film on attitudes towards same-sex relationships. Photo by Carol Palfrey

members, a selection which provided different perspectives on why Unitarians believe as they do about same-sex relationships. In addition, we asked two of the couples whose same-sex blessing ceremonies had been conducted at the Octagon to take part in the film and their interviews provided a very personal dimension.

Carol Palfrey is a member of the Octagon Chapel, Norwich.

Letters to the Editor

EC acting like a soviet star chamber

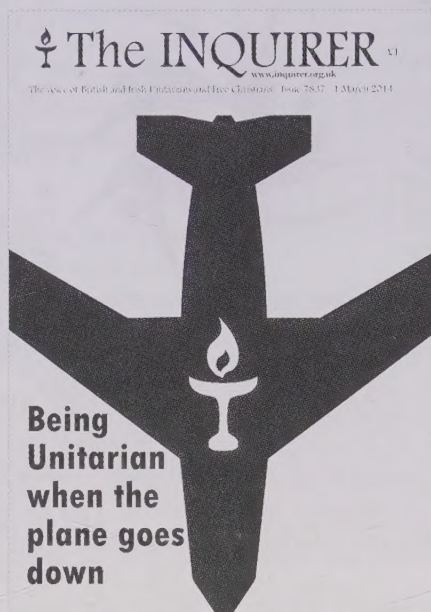
Unitarian General Assembly Executive Committee or Council of Elders? I feel quite sad at what has become of the EC. I have voted friends and colleagues on to it and seen them morph into members of the corporate beast, rather than be a catalyst for change. When did it become so like a Communism-era soviet, and a committee that was a secret court or star chamber denying access and challenge to press and public alike? The protected decisions are handed out through closed lips in corporate-speak jargon-infested bulletins. It is not us. It is not Unitarianism.

I would like to remind them that the ethos of our Unitarian Movement is love – caritas – care for the well being of the congregations and the members. I would like to remind them that all Unitarians aspire to have the heart of the Good Samaritan. We do not set out to judge, condemn and cast out those who do not seem to fit the mould. No one fits the mould as there is no mould for a Unitarian. We aspire to embrace those who seek the meaning behind life and those whose spirits are yearning for light. We aspire to embrace the one that society marginalises and recognise their worth as a human being. Unitarians seek to be an example.

We know that it is not easy to love. To judge and condemn is a weakness of love. Wrongs and prejudices have to be reconciled in love. Weaknesses have to be understood and forgiven. Difference has to be accepted in love.

If we did not have the EC, what do we actually need? We need our headquarters to represent us as a collective movement, facilitate the recruitment to ministry and the supply of materials that enrich spiritual development, and to look after the charity. I can see where a 'Council of Elders' or whatever other title we choose could carry the responsibility for the whole movement – but it needs to be set within that same ethos of love for the communities that it serves. Let us bid farewell to the bureaucratic EC and start again.

Tony McNeile
Bolton



Inquirer cover should reflect religious content

To the Editor:

I am sorry to say that I do not approve of the 'frontispiece' of the Inquirer of 1 March.

This is a religious newspaper and the cover should give some idea of its content. This edition with its black and ugly picture looks more like an advert for the National Socialist Movement which blighted my growing years with its stories of concentration camps and threats of war.

There is too much conflict in the denomination itself, without advertising it to those anxious to find a better way of life with like-minded people.

The copy has changed considerably over the past 80/90 years since I first started to read it, which is understandable. My Father, the Rev Harry Maguire used to read me the children's stories, which no longer appear. By all means let us have discussion on principles and belief. But life is more than that, thank heaven, if there is one!

Betty Calderara

John Pounds Unitarian Church
Portsmouth

Don't reject Dickens as a Unitarian

To the Editor:

In *The Inquirer* of 1 March Mr Barry Cundill ('Don't be so quick to claim Dickens') seems to feel 'a little uneasy' about claiming that Dickens was a Unitarian. Whether we like it or not, we

cannot ignore the fact that a person was a Unitarian just because we do not like some of his or her behaviour.

Dickens was a Unitarian. In a letter to a friend, a Harvard Professor, Dickens said that he had 'carried into effect an old idea of mine and joined the Unitarians.' He had a pew in the Unitarian Little Portland Street Chapel, off Regent Street. Before that he was a member at Essex Church.

Dickens may not have lived up to his own high standards – to do good and have compassion – but which of us does?

The Christmas Carol (to give only one example) was written during Dickens' Little Portland Street years. Claire Tomalin, who certainly knew that Dickens could be a 'stinker' (Mr Cundill's word) wrote that the message of *The Christmas Carol* is that a decent society depends on the rich learning to be generous and the poor being saved from ignorance and want. Dickens 'thou shouldst be living at this hour!' There is an excellent and well-researched article about 'Charles Dickens, Edward Tagart [Little Portland Street minister] and Unitarianism' by Anthony J. Cross in the Summer 1989 issue of *Faith and Freedom* - Vol 42, Part 2, number 125. Mr Cross concluded his article: '...the novelist, though a Unitarian only in the 1840s, was a Unitarian for the rest of his life.'

Peter Godfrey

Retired Unitarian Minister
Stonehouse

Inquirer letters policy

Letters should be succinct. It is preferable that they are sent by email to inquirer@btinternet.com. Typewritten or legible handwritten submissions may be sent to the editor at 46A Newmarket Road, Cringleford, Norwich NR4 6UF.

Letters should be signed with the writer's full name and, if applicable, the name of the group or congregation with which the writer is affiliated. A postal address and telephone number are required, for verification purposes. Letters will be edited for length and content and may appear in an excerpted form. Any affiliations listed with letter writers' names are for identification purposes only.

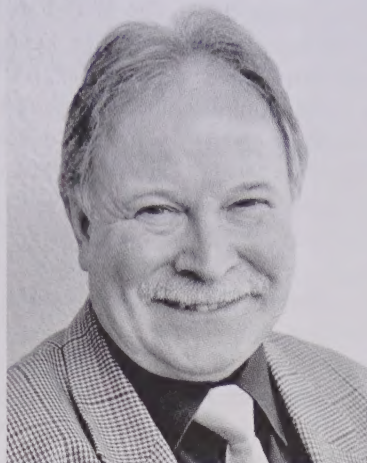
Reply: Statistics not the full picture

By Martin Whitell

The Executive committee expresses thanks again to the Rev'd Andrew Hill for his useful article published in *The Inquirer* of 23 November. The article encouraged the Executive Committee to take time to look again at how it is viewed by some in the movement and also to see if there were reasons for a perceived decline in interest in the EC elections process. We issued a holding reply in January and have subsequently had the opportunity to look at the questions the article raised in more detail and to reflect on them.

The statistical information is eye-catching but it should not be used to indicate a trend. The article recognises the figures for 2006 and 2008 are not based on the same constituency. A greater response was to be expected in 2006 after the build up to the new form of governance, targeting known quota-paying members, and with an election of over 20 candidates. In 2008, more votes were cast admittedly from a larger catchment, but this was an upturn nonetheless. In 2010 an election was not required. The results for 2012 showed a decrease in votes cast, but confidence was shown in returning two EC members who had completed a term or part of a term. This is not to be complacent, but the figures do not indicate a trend. We very much expect that in the forthcoming elections there will be an improvement on the votes cast in 2012.

Andrew Hill's recollection of the old Council as a loveable body is not shared by all. Alan Ruston wrote a highly descriptive article about its shortcomings in *The Inquirer* on 28 January 2006 as we moved to the new structures. We recognise that in comparison to the General Council with less than 30 members a group one quarter of this size may appear



to be secretive, but this is not intentional. However, in response to this challenge the EC will publish Key Messages within 10 days of the meeting in future. It will also invite the General Assembly President to attend the meetings as an observer. Hopefully this will enable Presidents to speak with greater authority about the EC's deliberations. As mentioned in the holding reply the Agenda for EC meetings has been circulated to District secretaries since the beginning of 2013 but we will endeavour to increase its accessibility.

The EC has already approved a future workshop to discuss the future strategic direction – with strategy group members and other key individuals later this year. It is also hoped that, as in previous years, many will take up the opportunity to attend the EC question and answer session at the Annual Meetings in April, where full and frank discussion takes place.

Much of the work that the EC carries out is associated with the straightforward duties of trusteeship. It can be routine, it does not always make for exciting reportage and some of the discussions are necessarily confidential inasmuch as they relate to individuals.

Andrew Hill has made a significant contribution to examining and reviewing the role of the EC. The forthcoming elections will show if there is a resurgence of interest in playing a part in our governance and strategy. Unitarians are encouraged to contact members of the Executive Committee or the Chief Officer if they feel they need more information about any topic. We will do our best to answer you.

The Rev Martin Whitell is convenor of the Executive Committee of the Unitarian General Assembly. He writes here on the committee's behalf.

Rod Dixon shared his gifts in the West Country

Roderick Noel Dixon

Rod Dixon, who died on his 85th birthday on 27 December, is best remembered in the Western Union for his lay charge and ministries in Taunton, Bridgwater and Bridport (1976-1993). Nationally he is remembered for his cartoons which appeared in a number of our periodicals, signed 'Noxid'. He discovered this talent as a boy and it demonstrated his delightful, sometimes wicked, sense of humour. After service in the RAF he followed a career as a draughtsman and eventually Somerset Rights of Way Officer, during which he designed a widely used waymark and the fingerless (vandal-proof) signpost.

He studied antique maps, walked or cycled countless miles of byways, footpaths and green lanes and was widely consulted on rights of way issues. He found his way into our movement and married lifelong Unitarian Eleanor Davis, taking particular delight in chauffeuring her around the country in his handsome Daimler saloon when she served as GA President in 1982-83. During his Unitarian College days in Manchester it was not unknown for Rod and another student to park the Daimler outside a local transport café, order tea and toast then ask for a student discount!

In the ministry he focused much of his energy on buildings renovation, raising large sums teaching italic handwriting classes. His religious quest continued and in later years he reverted to Roman Catholicism. In retirement he gained academic qualifications in countryside management and supported the Royal Air Forces Association with a sponsored cycle ride from Lands End to John O'Groats.

His funeral was conducted by a Roman Catholic priest, and his cremation by a Unitarian, the Rev Don Phillips (Cotswold Group). Our sympathy goes to Eleanor (former Lay Pastor at Crewkerne) her family and friends.



Roderick Noel Dixon

– John Midgley

News in brief

Birmingham Unitarians celebrate church

Unitarians have been prominent in Birmingham since the 18th century at least, but in the early 1970s the leaders of the community took a look at their crumbling Victorian edifice above the canal and decided it wasn't a fit home for the future. In its place they built a plain and practical brick building about a quarter of a mile away. It was opened in September 1973, and along with the new building came a new name for the congregation – no longer the Church of the Messiah, instead it is the Unitarian New Meeting Church.

In September, Unitarian New Meeting held a celebration of 40 years in the building. Worship was led by the Rev Simon Ramsay with the Rev Dr Vernon Marshall preaching. Also taking part were the Rev Winnie Gordon and student pastor Ralph Catts – all of whom have an association with Unitarians in Birmingham in either ministry, or ministerial formation. The building design has held up surprisingly well over the years, and while its external appearance is utilitarian, inside the worship space is attractive and was well-filled for the service, with members of the congregation, guests from other congregations in the area and local dignitaries.

At the afternoon tea afterwards, the Lord Mayor of Birmingham remarked that he'd never been to a more loving service or a more welcoming congregation. And with that glowing recommendation, let's look forward to many more years of liberal religious witness in Britain's second largest city.

– Angela Maher

HARRIS MANCHESTER COLLEGE

CONFERENCE:

CHURCH GROWTH, PROCESS THEOLOGY & DEVOTIONAL LITERATURE JUNE 2014

We are holding a Conference which, we hope, will appeal to all Ministers, Lay Pastors, Lay Leaders and Students for the Ministry from Monday June 23rd to Wednesday, June 25th. (Monday at 4.00 p.m. until Wednesday lunch). The cost will be £130, plus a small conference fee of £20.

Our speakers will include Rev Martyn Percy (Principal, Ripon College Oxford) on church growth, and Sister Benedicta Ward on Devotional Literature. Further speakers will be named nearer the time.

We choose to meet when the College is holding its end of term proceedings, which will include the annual meeting of honorary Governors and Friends on Tuesday afternoon and the Valediction Service of our Oxford ministerial students. Please contact Daniel Costley, preferably by email at the address below, if you would like to come. This applies also to members of MOSA unless you have already received the booking forms by e-mail. The deadline for bookings to be received is the 1st June. We would like to see all those interested in the topic.

Daniel Costley, HMC Ministerial Old Students' Association, 5 Westerham Road, Sevenoaks, Kent TN13 2PX Tel: 01732 465248;
Email: unidan2010@gmail.com

Music Society plans to create the world

The Unitarian Music Society plans its annual conference for 8th-11th August at the Nightingale Unitarian Conference Centre at Great Hucklow. Music lovers of all ages are welcome! We may be staying in Derbyshire but while we are there we will be 'creating the world', as we learn and perform Part 1

of Haydn's 'Creation'. Alongside there will be time for other music making both instrumental and through song ... and we promise there will be time for rest and relaxation for those who want to take time out! Instrumentalists, singers and those who just have an enthusiasm for music are welcome, including those coming for the first time.

In particular, UMS has always welcomed young singers and instrumentalists so to help those youngsters who are still in education subsidies are available. Please get in touch.

For all enquires please contact Helen Merritt

Tel no: 0151 625 5488 email: richardandhelenmerritt@hotmail.com

– Helen Merritt



Meditation Fellowship is taking bookings

In recent years the Meditation Fellowship has chosen to hold its Meditation Weekends at Ivy House in Warminster, a retreat centre with comfortable accommodation and superb gardens. There from Friday evening into Sunday afternoon in October, we set time aside for early morning silent meditation followed by guided meditation and walking meditation. There was also time to share music and readings together with a session of circle dancing.

Our leader is Richard Bober, a Buddhist teacher of meditation, who until a few years ago shared the running of these weekends with the late Rev David Monk.

I have to admit to not practicing regularly in my everyday life, but using meditation has become much easier and very helpful over recent years. It has certainly 'calmed down' my attitude to life and hopefully made me a stronger, more tolerant person. I've a feeling there is still much need for improvement. One of the Buddhist prayers says;

May I be filled with loving kindness,
May I be well,

May I be peaceful and at ease,
May I be happy.

Having said that, the meditator repeats the prayer on behalf of a loved one, then again for an unknown person – perhaps the postman or the checkout lady at the supermarket. Next say the prayer for your enemy – the person who causes you problems – and then for all beings.

The Meditation Fellowship meets in Warminster 16-18 May and 7-9 November 2014. We are a small group and new faces would be welcome. So if you would like to learn to meditate or deepen your practice with like-minded, friendly people, contact Brenda Knopf: 020380 555 333. Or email:

Brenda.knopf@btinternet.com

– Aria Datta